

Wallace, Cynthia R., *The Literary Afterlives of Simone Weil: Feminism, Justice, and the Challenge of Religion*¹

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Since the translation in English and publication of Weil's unfinished tragedy *Venice Saved*² in 2019, the attention to the connection between Simone Weil and Literature was brought to the forefront. Most of them focuses on the influence of Weil in literary theory and literature per se, specifically that of the works of Iris Murdoch. This is where Wallace's work differs as she explored the influence of Weil past Murdoch's existential ethics in literature. Wallace's careful selection of themes and authors to be included in this work proved to be a product of her deep intellectual engagement and critical understanding of literary and philosophic traditions. The book was divided into four chapters, three of which focus on the impact of Weil on individual author and the specific philosophical and ethical ideas that shaped their works, while the last chapter explicitly focuses on her influence on poetry and even the verse-biographies that was published in the past decades.

In the first chapter, Wallace focused on the political and ethical influence of Weil to Adrienne Rich. Rich has crafted this image that Weil is truly a philosopher of the oppressed, allowing her thoughts to enter the feminist scene in the 1970s, "despite the challenges of her philosophical and embodied self-emptying and her related turn to a kenotic Christianity."³ But unlike other scholars focusing on Rich's works, Wallace was careful not to concentrate on the 1970s feminism of Rich, as the decades that follow (1980–2012) have seen the maturation and deeper commitment of Rich to Weilian concepts such as "attention to human suffering, a clearsighted analysis of power in its many forms, a refusal of dehumanization and domination, a

¹ New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. 312pp.

² Simone Weil, *Venice Saved* trans by Silvia Panizza and Philip Wilson (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2019).

³ Cynthia R. Wallace, *The Literary Afterlives of Simone Weil: Feminism, Justice, and the Challenge of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 34.

defense of the inseparable nature of theory and practice, an anti-capitalist and anticolonial critique of modern global politics, and an inescapable responsibility as citizen-philosopher.”⁴ Rich’s poetry showed a plethora of illustration of how Weil conceptualize justice—a central theme in her socio-political philosophy. Through the exploration of themes of marginalization and the search for truth, Rich’s work resonates Weil’s belief that justice is inextricable from the practice of attention and the recognition of others’ affliction. They both understand justice not just as a legal or political principle but also as an ethical commitment rooted in empathy and duty. The poetic survey of solidarity and resistance found in Rich’s poetry further strengthens Weil’s principle that justice necessitates both individual altruism and collective action in the face of social inequalities.

In the second chapter, the similarity of Annie Dillard and Simone Weil—specifically their love for religion and metaphysics—became the center of Wallace’s exploration. Unlike Rich, Dillard adapted many of Weil’s thoughts on religion and her mysticism. She was very much explicit in saying that Weil is a constant inspiration in all her works especially in the “long-form nonfiction trilogy, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, the first book, but also in the last, *For the Time Being* (1999), and intensively engages with her thought in the middle book, *Holy the Firm* (1977).”⁵ In these works, Dillard masterfully weaved metaphysical and theological treatises, sans her previous readings of Transcendentalist influences, whose metaphysics led to pantheism rather than Christian or Jewish discourse. It is in these works that Dillard shows her competence in weaving “Weil’s insistence on attending to the real—to things as they are—and to the problem of suffering”⁶ in literature. Dillard emphasizes what Weil has been discussing as the Stoic commitment to loving the world as it is and not how we imagine it to be—with its beauty and flaws altogether. Other scholars would see this as a total break from the religious notions of Weil—but Dillard was able to bridge this concept with that of Weil’s concepts found in *Waiting for God*.⁷

The third chapter explores Weil’s influence on Mary Gordon’s fiction. At the center of Wallace’s study, she focuses on Weil’s and Gordon’s tendency to question the Church.⁸ This is evident in many of her characters, as most of

⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷ Weil discussed this very concept of loving the world with its imperfection in a chapter in *Waiting for God* with the title “Forms of the Implicit Love of God: Love of the Order of the World.” The second form of implicit love of God is the love of the order of the world. This pertains to the love that we have of the beauty of the universe; “by loving the order of the world we imitate the divine love which created the universe of which we are a part of.” See Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* trans by Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 2009), 99.

⁸ Wallace, *Literary Afterlives*, 123.

her stories include characters who turn away from religion. This generated a trope of generational shift from religious to areligious; the movement from strict religious observance to rejection of religion.⁹ In the three novels that Wallace selected in this section, she focuses on the interconnection of the concepts of sacrifice, the metaphor of hunger and thirst, and force. The works *Pearl* (2005), *Simone Weil in New York* (2014), and *There Your Heart Lies* (2017)—in different degrees show how Simone Weil’s concept of sacrifice and suffering plays in the present times. In these three works, sacrifice and suffering were considered in different ways other than just the religious sense but also includes representation of sacrifice and suffering in a secular sense. It highlights the role of force in the existence of suffering in this world. Most of the time, we associate force with violence—i.e. the use of force to coerce people to do things, to colonize, and even to “protect” oneself. For Weil, “force is what defines human condition; it is embedded in our nature.”¹⁰ In her work, *The Iliad or The Poem of Force*, she defines force as “that which turns anybody subjected to it into a thing.”¹¹ It is that which drives people to commit violence. Force is what allows one to forget her vulnerability. Dillard and Weil both agree that force is not something to be proud of—it is not something to boast about because “nobody really possesses it.”¹² Weil maintains that no one really benefits from using force, as she writes: “force is as pitiless to the man who thinks he possesses it, as it is to its victim; the latter it crushes, the former it intoxicates.”¹³ This notion of force is at the very core of affliction. It is the starting point of all forms of suffering. The dangers of violence, of colonization, of war—all of these are birthed from the notion of force. But the concept of force is also inherent in every human person. She maintains that “barbarity is a permanent and universal characteristic of human nature and develops more or less according to the circumstances that give it play.”¹⁴

In the last chapter, Wallace posed the question why poets seem to be fascinated in putting into verse the life of Simone Weil. This section seems to focus on the “sense of feminist urgency”¹⁵ to present the lives and works of early female writers to a broader audience. Poetry serves “as metaxu: they

⁹ *Ibid.*,

¹⁰ See Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 45. See also Alexander Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 41.

¹¹ Simone Weil, “The Iliad or The Poem of Force,” in *War and The Iliad: Simone Weil and Rachel Bespaloff*, trans. by Mary McCarthy (New York: NYREB, Inc., 2005), 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ See Simone Weil, *Selected Essays, 1934-1943: Historical, Political, and Moral Writings* trans. by Richard Rees (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 142-144.

¹⁵ Wallace, *Literary Afterlives*, 175.

connect readers to Weil even as they distance us from her.”¹⁶ Wallace contends that the paradox that plagued the philosophy and life of Weil—her presence and absence, her dedication and detachment—is also the paradox that connects us to her—even to the point of making us closer to her across time. These paradoxes are best represented by the poems and poets she included in this work. These engagement of poetry with Weil’s life emphasizes also the need to decreate the “I”. There is a need to decreate the “I” because it obscures our perspectives and the only way “to escape from the errors of false perspective is to carry one’s heart beyond space, beyond the world, to God.”¹⁷ This establishes that decreation becomes the very challenge that Weil’s life posed for us to be ethical.

The Literary Afterlives of Simone Weil offers a multifaceted discussion on why Weil’s ideas persist to be important in understanding the ethical and aesthetic concerns of modern literature. Wallace’s work invites readers to re-evaluate the intersections of literature, philosophy, and feminism, while also emphasizing the essential part of literature in forming our moral and spiritual imaginations.

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¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁷ See Lisa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil* (London, United Kingdom: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 177.

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